

Greek influence on Coptic case?

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1. Introductory information about Egyptian and Coptic

Coptic (Afro-Asiatic) is the final stage of the Ancient Egyptian language. Egyptian is the language with the longest attested history: from ca. 3000 BC till ca. AD 1100. In the course of these four millennia Egyptian underwent major grammatical changes and it can be divided into five stages called, rather predictably Old, Middle and Late Egyptian, followed by Demotic and Coptic. For the purposes of linguistic analysis these five stages of development can be considered separate languages. As Egyptian has come down to us in the form of written sources of a considerable degree of formalization and standardization, the course of language change is not recorded and can only be hypothetically reconstructed.

Earlier Egyptian, ca. 3000-1300 BC:

- Old Egyptian
- Middle (Classical) Egyptian

Later Egyptian (1300 BC – AD 1100):

- Late Egyptian (1300–700 BC)
- Demotic (700 BC - AD 100)
- Coptic (AD 300 – 1100), two main literary varieties: Sahidic and Bohairic

Coptic was used in Egypt and to some extent also in Nubia and is attested in written sources since the fourth century AD till the eleventh century when it was superseded by Arabic. Coptic is still used as the liturgical language of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt. In contrast to the earlier historical stages of Egyptian, Coptic does not use any of the native Egyptian writing systems such as hieroglyphs or the graphically simplified systems called hieratic and demotic. As Egypt in Late Antiquity was a multilingual country with Greek enjoying the status of the principal literary and administrative language, the Greek alphabet was adopted for writing in Coptic by adding seven characters based on demotic signs to the 24 originally Greek characters (see also Zakrzewska *fc.*).

The grammar of Coptic is still poorly described. For basic linguistic information on Egyptian and Coptic, one can consult Loprieno (2001, 2004) and Loprieno and Müller (2012). Of the two main literary varieties of Coptic, Sahidic and Bohairic, only Sahidic has a reference grammar that meets contemporary linguistic standards (Reintges 2004).

2. Linguistic situation in Egypt following the conquest by Alexander the Great (332 BC):

- Ptolemy, one of the Alexander's marshals, becomes the king of Egypt and a founder of a new dynasty. Greek becomes the language of administration and cultural prestige.
- 31 BC: the battle of Actium. Egypt becomes a part of the Roman Empire. Greek is the main official language, the use of Latin is limited to certain highly formal contexts.
- ca. 100-300 AD: **texts written in Egyptian rapidly recede** from all functional domains; Greek becomes the norm for written documents: "There was no way to have an Egyptian sentence recorded except to translate it into Greek" (Bagnall 1993: 238).
- 4th century AD: **early Coptic texts emerge** in ascetic/monastic communities, for example the linguistic experiments of Pachomius, the founding father of cenobitic monasticism, considered one of the first authors originally writing in Coptic (d. 346); the Manichaean corpus from Kellis (Ismant el-Kharab, Dakhla Oasis): 355-380 AD.
- 5th – 6th centuries: the use Coptic spreads into literate milieus outside monastic circles: ca. 450: a translation into Coptic of a diplomatic letter sent by a Byzantine high military Viventius to the Nubian tribal chief Tantani; ca. 525-575: the earliest monumental inscription in Coptic from Dendur in Northern Nubia; 569: the first preserved dated legal document in Coptic (a settlement drafted by Dioscoros of Aphroditê). Importantly, Greek is continued to be used alongside Coptic.
- 641: Arab conquest of Egypt; 706: the imposition of Arabic as the exclusive language of the central government. Paradoxically, most of the preserved Coptic documentary and ecclesiastical texts are dated to the seventh-eighth centuries.
- The end of the eighth century: decline of both Coptic and Greek written production.
- 11th century: the last attestations of the use of Coptic as a living language of written communication; Coptic becomes the principal liturgical language of the Egyptian Orthodox Church under the Patriarchate of Alexandria.

3. Challenging myths about early Coptic

Three persistent myths about the origin of Coptic:

- that early Coptic texts would show us how Egyptians of the fourth century spoke;
- that due to contacts with Greek during the preceding centuries Coptic became so heavily 'hellenized' that one could qualify it as a 'bilingual language variety' (Reintges 2001; 2004a: 36-43; 2004b);
- that Coptic would be used by the Egyptian Christians in order to convert simple people who lacked the command of Greek.

Alternative view (see Zakrzewska fc. 1, fc 3): early Coptic should be seen as a *deliberately constructed literary idiom, a prestige variety initially intended for in-group use within particular ascetic communities of fourth century Egypt.*

Argumentation

- The rise of Coptic as an alternative literary language, despite the dominant position of Greek as the language of culture, administration and, importantly, Christian discourse, involved a dramatic change of *linguistic behaviour* of certain segments of Egyptian population. As a change of linguistic behaviour is basically a social phenomenon (Milroy 1992: 202), it should be explained in terms of *social functions of language use*.
- Although a substantial percentage of the inhabitants of Egypt in the third-fourth centuries AD must have spoken a form of Egyptian, there is no evidence of what this spoken Egyptian could have been like. What can be studied is *Coptic as a written code*, represented by various scribal traditions. Instead of speculating about the supposedly high degree of bilingualism in late antique Egypt, we should thus better discuss well-attested *biliteracy*, that is "the use of two or more languages in or around writing" (Hornberger 2003: xii; see also Johanson 2013).
- In a milieu of restricted literacy, *literacy practices* (Street 1984) could have more symbolic than utilitarian function: practicing literacy was not only a question of practical needs but also of social and cultural considerations such as the expression of a certain life style. The association of Coptic with Christianity is not due to its alleged function of converting 'indigenous' Egyptians, but to its rise and development within *early ascetic communities* which were the locus of *innovative and highly regarded social practices* in Late Antiquity.
- The members of these ascetic communities creatively used the Egyptian and Greek linguistic resources at their disposal in order to strengthen their social ties and in-group solidarity. Paraphrasing P. Muysken (2000: 275), one could say that they wanted to express in *Egyptian* the *Christian Greek conceptual universe*.
- Later Coptic started to be used also by those biliterate members of the laity who wanted to align themselves with the spiritual authority and worldly power of local monasteries.

Interim conclusion

The linguistic situation in Roman and Byzantine Egypt can be characterized as a case of *extended diglossia* (see Myers-Scotton 2006: 76-89, Schiffman 1997, Hudson, ed. 2002) or, strictly speaking, *polyglossia with biliteracy*:

- *polyglossia*: alongside formal (Attic) Greek, Latin (to some extent) and later Coptic as written H varieties, there were vernaculars, most notably Egyptian vernaculars, but plausibly also Greek ones.
- *biliteracy*: the use of one of the H varieties within the same society, often by the same individuals, for different communicative purposes.

4. The degree of Greek influence on Coptic

4.1 Lexical influence

Pending the results of the Leipzig-based DDGLC project (Database and Dictionary of Greek Loanwords in Coptic), Zakrzewska (fc. 3) examines the lexical items of Greek origin in an early Coptic text corpus from Kellis. These form

- 25% of the lexical items in the edited documentary texts (Gardner, Alcock & Funk, eds., 1999: 282-315);
- 18% of the lexical items in the literary texts (Gardner, ed., 1996: 145-169; 2007: 139-156).

Compared with the results of the Leipzig based *Loanword Typology Project (LWT)* reported by Tadmor (2009: 56-57), this particular variety of Coptic could thus qualify as an ‘**average borrower**’, comparable to Dutch (with 19% loanwords) rather than a ‘high borrower’ like English (41%). The actual influence, moreover, appears to be limited to **cultural vocabulary** adopted in a rather arbitrary fashion. The **arbitrary character** of lexical borrowings is characteristic for deliberate borrowing, in contrast to organic or spontaneous borrowing over a prolonged period of time (Muysken 2007: 316-320).

4.2 Grammatical influence

See Zakrzewska (fc. 1)

Of thirty six grammatical categories under comparison (see Matras 2007), sixteen appear to be influenced, in a greater or lesser degree (sometimes very slightly), by contact between Egyptian and Greek. As the scores of other languages from Matras’ sample run from 6 up to 31 categories (Matras 2007: 63, Table 1), the degree of Greek grammatical influence on Coptic appears to be **average**.

It should be stressed, that it is not only the number of categories but also their kind that point to a relatively low degree of contact-induced grammatical change:

- The strongest degree of Greek influence can be noticed in the organization of discourse and in clause combining;
- A high proportion of function words in the total score (ca. 50%), which is characteristic for languages relatively less influenced grammatically (Matras 2007: 61-63);
- Some of these borrowed function words resemble lexical borrowings, as they are akin to cultural vocabulary: numerals in indiction (taxation) years, days of the week inasmuch relevant for religious practices, address forms;
- From the point of view of the 4-M model advocated by Myers-Scotton and Jake (2000, 2001), only *early system morphemes* have entered the Coptic system: first of all discourse markers, to a lesser degree discourse motivated constituent order and to an extremely slight degree the markers of plurality, gender and *nomina agentis* (isolated examples in late texts).

4.3 Apparent counter-evidence: the category of case

The category of case, when expressed by bound morphemes in fusing languages, is a nominal category which seems least likely borrowable cross-linguistically (Johanson 2009, Matras and Sakel, eds., 2007). Predictably, no Greek case forms are used in Coptic, with one exception: Greek proper names can sometimes occur with the vocative ending, for example *ō Timothee*, *Anania* (Layton 2004: 102). This apparent anomaly can easily be explained, however, because, in contrast to all other cases, vocative forms are in fact parentheticals not integrated syntactically into the clause.

5. Case markers (MAT) or valency patterns (PAT)? Non-default vs. default marking of the second argument in Coptic vis-à-vis Greek

Sakel (2007: 15):

MAT: “morphological material and its phonological shape from one language is replicated in another language.”

PAT: “only the patterns of the other language are replicated, i.e. the organization, distribution and mapping of grammatical and semantic meaning, while the form itself is not borrowed.”

Major markers of the second argument (SA) in Greek:

- default: accusative
- non-default: genitive and dative (see Blass and Debrunner 1979: 139-146 and 150-156 respectively; for Attic Greek see Kühner, Blass and Gerth 1963-1966, II,2: 343-382 and 406-426).

Changes in first millennium AD: the disappearance of the dative and genitive as markers of the second and third arguments and their replacement by the accusative, in some instances reinforced by a preposition (Blass and Debrunner 1979: 166-191, Bortone 2010: 177-180, 203-205; Horrocks 2010: 246-247, 284-285).

Table 1. Major markers of the second argument (SA) in Coptic

NP	Clitic	Remarks
head marking (verb in the construct state)	head marking (verb in the pronominal state)	the dominant marking strategy in pre-Coptic Egyptian
preposition <i>n-</i>	preposition <i>mmo=</i>	the default prepositional marker of the second argument
preposition <i>e-</i>	preposition <i>ero=</i>	basically a marker of the allative with extensions to other semantic domains
preposition <i>n-</i>	preposition <i>na=</i>	basically a marker of ‘dative’ semantic roles: recipient, beneficiary, addressee
other prepositions	other prepositions	

Research question:

Is there evidence for calquing or replicating Greek non-default marking in Coptic, in other words, is there systematic correspondence between the use of the prepositions *e-ero=* or *n-/na=* in Coptic and the genitive or dative in Greek?

Initial assumptions:

1. The function of diverse marking of the second argument is to flag, or index, certain semantic properties of the situation (the so-called characterizing, as opposed to discriminatory, function of case);
2. Non-default marking most likely expresses various facets of a non-prototypical transitive situation.

Table 2. Transitivity features (Næss 2007: 15, after Hopper & Thompson 1980)

	HIGH	LOW
Participants	two or more	one
Kinesis	action	non-action
Aspect	telic	atelic
Punctuality	punctual	non-punctual
Volitionality	volitional	non-volitional
Affirmation	affirmative	negative
Mode	realis	irrealis
Agency	Agent high in potency	Agent low in potency
Affectedness of Patient	totally affected	not affected
Individuation of Patient	highly individuated	non-individuated

Method:

I compare a small but representative sample of Coptic verbs with their equivalents in Greek, paying particular attention to the marking of the second argument.

All the verbs are excerpted from a single text corpus, written in the Bohairic variety of Coptic, Hyvernat 1977 [1886], (see e.g. Zakrzewska *fc.* 2)

Greek translational equivalents: Crum (1939).

Valency of Greek verbs: Bauer (1988).

As no semantic analysis of Coptic verbs is available, I divided the verbs under consideration tentatively into three classes, representing three types of non-prototypical affectedness of the second argument:

1. Certain amount of *instigation (or agency)* on the part of the SA,
2. Either *physical affectedness pertaining to the SA's outer sphere* or *mental affectedness* (pertaining to the SA's inner personal sphere), in contradistinction to the prototypical transitive situations in which the SA is totally affected.
3. Affectedness pertaining to the SA's *sphere of influence*, in its physical or mental aspects (for this concept, not included in the overview by Næss 2007 and Hopper & Thompson 1980, see Dąbrowska 1997).

In each of these three classes the verbs are subdivided into two subclasses:

- verbs denoting 'activities' (in the non-technical sense of the word),
- verbs denoting speech actions and/or ritual behavior, that is verbal or non-verbal actions that bring about certain changes in the referent of the second arguments (e.g. performative verbs).

Table 3.

A. Verbs of perception and cognition		B. Verbs of speech actions (1)						
SA's affectedness. SA is not affected but is a Stimulus or Source which some <i>instigation</i> .		SA's affectedness. Not "an occasional and arbitrary patient [but a] protagonist [who] belongs to what <i>precedes</i> the materialization of the subject-object relation. In this reversed causality link, the object is at the basis of the subject-object relationship and motivates its materialization" (Delbeque 2002: 90, 98). This implies a certain amount of <i>instigation</i> or agency on the part of the SA, who has a certain role to play and is therefore partly 'responsible' for the resultant change of state.						
Verb	Coptic	SAmarker	Greek	SAmarker	Coptic	SAmarker	Greek	SAmarker
'see', 'look'	<i>nau</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>blepō</i>	Acc	<i>ti-šini</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>aspazomai</i>	Acc
'hear', 'listen'	<i>sōtm</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>akouō</i>	Acc/ Gen (source)	<i>smou</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>eulogeō</i>	Acc
'know'	<i>emi</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>ginōskō</i>	Acc	<i>ti-ho</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>parakaleō</i>	Acc
'believe'	<i>enahli</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>pisteuō</i>	Dat / prep. + Acc	<i>ōrk</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>orkizō</i>	Acc
					<i>er-hik</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>goēteuō,</i> <i>mageuō,</i>	Acc
					<i>er-magia</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>goēteuō,</i> <i>mageuō.</i>	Acc
					<i>ti-apophasis</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>katakriṅō</i>	Acc
Comment: The use of <i>e-/ero=</i> in Coptic is extension of the allative into the mental domain, a phenomenon frequently found crosslinguistically: "the perceiver/conceiver [can be seen] as moving figuratively towards the percept/concept (the ALLATIVE marked entity)", Rice and Kabata (2007: 483).		Comment: The use of <i>e-/ero=</i> in Coptic is extension of the allative into the social domain, resulting in constructions similar to marking of human patients with the allative/dative preposition <i>a</i> (as opposed to zero) in e.g. Spanish and colloquial Italian (Differential Object Marking): Allative → Recipient → Addressee/Benefactive → Patient , see e.g. Aristar (1997), Dąbrowska (1997: 49-54), Company (2001), Delbeque (2002), Heine & Kuteva (2002: 38-38), Halevy (2007), Roegiest (2007), Romagno (2007), Heine (2009: 468-469).						

Table 4.

A. Verbs denoting contact-by-motion					B. Verbs of ritual behaviour (whether or not in combination with speech actions)				
SA's affectedness: SA <i>superficially affected</i> (outer sphere), which contrasts with prototypical, <i>total</i> , affectedness with externally observable effects.									
Verb	Coptic	SAmarker	Greek	SAmarker	Verb	Coptic	SAmarker	Greek	SAmarker
'hit'	<i>šari</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>typtō</i>	Acc	'honour'	<i>tī-taio</i>	<i>n-/na=</i>	<i>timaō</i>	Acc
'touch'	<i>k'oh</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>aptō</i>	Gen	'glorify'	<i>tī-ōou</i>	<i>n-/na=</i>	<i>doxazō</i>	Acc
'kiss'	<i>tī-phi</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>phileō</i>	Acc	'put to shame', 'disgrace'	<i>tī-šipi</i>	<i>n-/na=</i>	<i>kataischynō</i>	Acc
					'baptize'	<i>tī-ōms</i>	<i>n-/na=</i>	<i>baptizō</i>	Acc
					'instruct'	<i>tī-sbō</i>	<i>n-/na=</i>	<i>didaskō</i>	Acc
Comment: In many languages verbs denoting superficial bodily contact can be marked in a divergent way, e.g. by means of the genitive, see e.g. Lander, Y.A. 2009: 581-592, see also Holvoet (1991) for examples from Polish, Baltic and Finnic.									

Table 5.

B. Verbs of speech actions (2)									
A. Other verbs									
SA's affectedness. The SA's <i>sphere of influence</i> (see Dąbrowska 1997) is positively or detrimentally affected by the Agent's activities.									
Verb	Coptic	SAmarker	Greek	SAmarker	Verb	Coptic	SAmarker	Greek	SAmarker
'overcome'	<i>k'ro</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>nikaō</i> , <i>katagōnizomai</i>	Acc Acc	'promise'	<i>ōrk</i>	<i>n-/na=</i>	<i>epagellomai</i>	Dat
'guard'	<i>areh</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>Phylassō</i>	Acc	'promise'	<i>tī-logos</i>	<i>n-/na=</i>	<i>epagellomai</i>	Dat
'have mercy', 'take pity'	<i>tī-aso</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>eleeō</i>	Acc	'advise'	<i>tī-sok'ni</i>	<i>n-/na=</i>	<i>symbouleō</i>	Dat
'help'	<i>er-boēthin</i>	<i>e-/ero=</i>	<i>boētheō</i>	Dat	'order'	<i>tī-honhen</i>	<i>n-/na=</i>	<i>epitassō</i>	Dat
					'order'	<i>ouahsahni</i>	<i>n-/na=</i>	<i>epitassō</i>	Dat
Comment: the verbs 'promise' and 'order' occurred with <i>n-/na=</i> already in pre-Coptic Egyptian.									

6. Conclusions

The following patterns have become clear:

The innovative Coptic marker *e-/ero=* is preferably employed for the SA in various non-prototypical transitive situations. The same situations in Greek, however, are not, generally speaking, treated as divergent from the transitive prototype. Consequently, their SA is marked by the default accusative case (with a few exceptions). Significantly, verbal borrowings from Greek behave conform to the Coptic patterns, rather than the Greek ones. This prompts a conclusion that Greek valency patterns *did not influence* Coptic case marking as far as the above categories are concerned.

As for the marker *n-/na=*, Coptic applies it in situations in which the referents of the SA are affected in their personal sphere or sphere of influence as a result of the Agent's ritual behaviour or speech actions. Only this last category of SA is systematically marked by the dative in Greek. In these cases, however, the Greek influence cannot be straightforwardly assumed, as marking by this preposition is inherited from pre-Coptic Egyptian. Moreover, dative-like marking of the SA in such situations is also quite common cross-linguistically and due to semantic factors rather than conditioned by language contact.

The above conclusions are based on a sample from one text corpus and a more extensive research could reveal some differences. However, I expect that the above patterns would still hold and the differences would be limited to lexical idiosyncrasies.

Still, some Greek influence on Coptic case cannot be entirely excluded. The most plausible way in which Greek could influence the emergent Coptic literary idiom, could be activation of certain sensitivity to non-prototypical transitive situations expressed by means of case distinctions (the characterizing function of case). As Greek case endings were difficult to borrow, the 'constructors' of Coptic could have developed formal exponents for signaling these distinctions by generalizing the already existent prepositional strategy of marking of the second argument. They could also be inspired by the fact that Greek case forms tended to get prepositional reinforcing at this period.

As there are no one-to-one correspondences between the Coptic and Greek verbs, as regards their meaning and corresponding case marking, it was not simply 'calquing' but rather "creative restructuring" (Johanson 2009: 496): the refined case system obtained in this way is neither 'Greek' nor 'Egyptian' but innovative with respect to both languages. Moreover, parallels between Coptic and other languages, especially Romance, but also Baltic and Slavic, suggest that the development of Coptic case can reflect certain general typological tendencies, for which the situation of language contact could provide an extra stimulus (see e.g. Heine and Kuteva 2005: 74-75).

It should also be noted, that Coptic and Greek were drifting apart as regards case marking and transitivity: especially from the third century A.D. onwards, their respective case systems were evolving in the opposite directions. While Coptic developed prepositional case distinctions in order to express prototypical vs. non-prototypical transitivity, the development of Greek followed a divergent path, resulting in the expansion of the default patientive case, the accusative, at the expense of the dative and genitive. By the same token, the characterizing function of case gained more importance in Coptic, while in Greek this function was decreasing. As I argue in Zakrzewska (in prep.), the new paradigm of transitivity developed in Coptic could be motivated not so much by language contact as by disappearance of the morphological passive.

Table 6. Synopsis: two paradigms of transitivity in Bohairic Coptic

Type of case marking	head marking	dependent marking (prepositions)
Main function of case marking	discriminatory	characterizing
Semantic underpinning	aspect (telicity) + referentiality of the second argument	decreasing affectedness / increasing agentivity of the second argument
Distribution: synchronic	limited to selected types of constructions	quasi-universal
Distribution: diachronic	recessive	productive
Syntactic and pragmatic functions of the arguments in a clause	non-topical subjects and topical objects, a substitute of passive	topical subjects and non-topical objects
Constituent order	syntactic perspectivizing: S>O, S> non-S	centripetal (reflecting syntactic scope): V>DO>IO>S

General conclusion

Coptic was constructed on the basis of ‘native’ Egyptian morphosyntax, including the category of case, enriched with Greek cultural vocabulary and adapted to emulate Greek rhetorical and argumentative structures. A strategy of adopting diverse elements from a prestige language is quite common and, as Johanson (2013: 323) observes, “the codes representing this type do not seem to deserve characteristics such as ‘intertwined’, ‘mixed’ or ‘hybrid’, even if they, as English, manifest excessive copying”.

Coptic is thus not a “bilingual language variety” but a literary idiom which functioned in a situation of polyglossia with biliteracy and was endowed with symbolic capital as the language of the pioneers of the monastic movement.

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